



ALBERTO RICCA 2023-02-15

## APATHETIC ALGORITHMS, ARTIFICIAL ARTISANS

GENERICSCIENCE ALGORITHM, ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE, MACHINE LEARNING, MUSIC

*the universe is known*

*i see it all at once*

*but alas, i'm not alive*

- @AIPoet2, 25 settembre 2021

Some online communities dedicated to visual arts, like Newgrounds, or the subReddit *r/interestingasfuck*, recently banned synthetic images generated by Machine Learning algorithms. It's a significant turn of events: these communities are more akin to hoarded piles than to curatorial projects, and if Dall-E or Midjourney stop being *interesting as fuck* in such a short time, it means they lack the power to constantly renew the wonder.

Asking ourselves if a machine can create art is a predictable trap; my focus then is not on the creations themselves, but on us: I ask myself why we struggle in accepting the idea of artificial creativity.

In this article, I wish to analyze the crisis happening between creation and sharing, between stockpiled artworks and emotion: in the undefined zone that I will improperly call *latent space* where the choice between art and boredom happens. Something that doesn't really belong to the algorithm, but depends on the context and on the sublime of limitless.

<https://arstechnica.com/information-technology/2022/09/flooded-with-ai-generated-images-some-art-communities-ban-them-completely/> [Ars Technica on the banning of AI generated images on communities such as Newgrounds, Inkblot Art, and Fur Affinity]

[https://www.reddit.com/r/awfuleverything/comments/103udwd/even\\_artists\\_with\\_works\\_that\\_merely\\_look\\_like\\_ai](https://www.reddit.com/r/awfuleverything/comments/103udwd/even_artists_with_works_that_merely_look_like_ai) [Mods on r/Art ban an artist for painting like an AI]

<https://www.gwern.net/docs/ai/music/2022-shank.pdf> [AI Composer Bias: Listeners Like Music Less When They Think It Was Composed by an AI – Department of Psychological Science, Missouri University of Science and Technology]

<https://arxiv.org/abs/2212.04965> [Seeing a Rose in Five Thousand Ways]

## WHAT IF WE KISSED IN THE LATENT SPACE

*The truth of bridges is that they made him feel he was doing some mobius gyration, becoming one-sided, losing all purchase on name and place and food-taste and weekends with the in-laws-hanging sort of unborn in generic space.*

- Don De Lillo, UNDERWORLD

In 1943 we theorized neural networks, but only recently the public saw manifestations powerful enough to shatter our beliefs on what's real, what's synthetic, and what is human creativity: the lisergeric pareidolism of Google Deep Dream, [thisxdoesnotexist.com](http://thisxdoesnotexist.com), famous faces defamed by deep fakes, GPT-3 writing articles, vocal and musical synthesis by Open AI, and the immediate dismay caused by artistic output of DALL-E and ChatGPT.

There's no magic in how Machine Learning algorithms work: the recent timing of their public appearance is only due to the contemporary ability of computers to gather and classify fathomless quantities of data, that algorithms can "study" to build abstract prevision models: in the same way we learn how to read and write by seeing thousands of exemplars of the same

letter, the machine learns to shape random noise to get something that resembles every image it ever saw, every text it ever read. Somebody (often you, after years spent solving captcha with traffic lights, street numbers, blurry words) built catalogues for the machine to study, images with a label, so now it knows what a teddy bear walking on the Moon looks like.

It's not a faultless system: every archive is curated and labeled by humans (or by other trained algorithms), and there are choices, even unconscious ones, that offset its neutrality, and that foster into relations between data that can become very difficult to be noticed.

The bias, conscious or not, is a real risk, and the reason why it is important to keep watch, and demand open algorithms. Otherwise, one of them could obviously catalogue a person of color as a gorilla, or deny a mortgage to somebody that could or could not develop a cancer.

<https://newsinitiative.withgoogle.com/it-it/resources/journalism/introduction-to-machine-learning/lessons/bias-in-machine-learning/> [Google lessons about bias in machine learning]

<https://www.csail.mit.edu/news/explained-how-tell-if-artificial-intelligence-working-way-we-want-it> [Explanation methods to open the algorithm]

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/03/technology/facebook-ai-race-primates.html> [Facebook Apologizes After A.I. Puts 'Primates' Label on Video of Black Men]

<https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-33347866> [Google apologises for Photos app's racist blunder]

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-amazon-com-jobs-automation-insight-idUSKCN1MK08G> [Amazon scraps secret AI recruiting tool that showed bias against women]

<https://www.businessinsider.com/apple-card-sexism-steve-wozniak-2019-11?IR=T> [Apple cofounder Steve Wozniak says Apple Card offered his wife a lower credit limit]

But even when well trained, the tool in itself would remain a bizarre experiment without an interface that invites use and makes the tool understandable: many media synthesis algorithms deny us a precise control of esoteric parameters, and prefer human metaphors, like the prosecution or variations of a theme (like continuation of songs by Open AI, or the widening of photographic panoramas), or a descriptive prompt, as preferred by ChatGPT or by images generators like DALL-E or Midjourney, that accept descriptions like, as the example above, “a teddy bear walking on the Moon”, or “elaborate drop cap art of the capital letter D integrated in a seamless doodle art, organic, decorative, black and white, in the style of salvador dali”, or again “iphone made of terracotta from Harappa, Indus Valley Civilization, Pakistan; 2600-1900 BC, studio light”.

Remember to always thank the algorithm.

<https://gist.github.com/ozh/8143e5978a7bd0d85b725c9dc34a2451> [DALL-E prompt examples]

Greg Rutkowski is a fantasy illustrator; some prompt artist, paradoxical new specie of middleman dialoguing with algorithms, discovered that DALL-E accepts Greg's name, and is able to reproduce his style of painting – which very soon surpassed Picasso or Michelangelo in number of queries for the high meme value of dragons and wizards; the artist found himself living the future of plagiarism without a guilty part – even better, this plagiarism is almost flattering, as it demonstrated such a strong presence of Rutkowski's works in the datasets, enough to bias them. Of course the algorithm is innocent, and it's just "following orders", but it's difficult to ignore the scary possibilities these necromancy rites suggest – and that video deep-fakes or the synthesis of famous voices confirm: if a famous actress or a legendary singer have been sampled and modeled, why should they stop producing after death? Why shouldn't they become a vessel for bad messages or actions? It's another nail in the coffin of trust, truth and future: technically it's possible to avoid it, morally it's plausible to prevent it, but no magic circle resisted for a long time against such new powers.

<https://www.technologyreview.com/2022/09/16/1059598/this-artist-is-dominating-ai-generated-art-and-hes-not-happy-about-it/> [MIT Technology Review on Greg Rutkowski's case]

<https://www.theverge.com/2023/1/16/23557098/generative-ai-art-copyright-legal-lawsuit-stable-diffusion-midjourney-deviantart> [Class actions filed against Stability AI and Midjourney]

<https://www.theredhandfiles.com/chat-gpt-what-do-you-think/> [Nick Cave comments a song written in his style by an algorithm: "writing...is an act of self-murder"]

*"It's funny how recognizing AI art nowadays is just the same old rules as recognizing the fae in old tales. 'Count the finger, count the knuckles, count the teeth, check the shadows...' ...and under NO circumstances should you make deals with their kind."*

- @erkhyan@yiff.life on mastodon.gamedev.place

The apocalyptic fears of many illustrators, copywriters, and blue collars of culture look more real every day, but a keen eye could catch some revealing details, common to every kind of media synthesis: light glitches (fleeting audio\video lo-fi filtering, uncanny figures or blurry backgrounds), and an overall lack of comprehension of *relationship* between represented objects, sections of a song, paragraphs of a text, which makes every picture look like a character study, or a supermarket catalogue, without drama or story.

Results are bland, truly surprising as a demonstration of technological research, but insipid without reading the prompt that sparked their creation – most of the time, the only human element, the only element of choice; almost a title, something that a lot of contemporary art uses with great care.

Everything else is an elaborated pareidolia, our mind necessarily reading things into these synthetic media in the same way we see a scream in a floppy bag, or surprise in an electric socket.

In neural networks lingo, the latent space is where the algorithm puts the ideal map of relationships between the data describing the objects that it studies. It's not accessible to the user: it's often a space with many dimensions, because the same thing can be described from many different perspectives: its color, its frequency spectrum, but also more complex characteristics derived from analysis or labeling, like being a female voice, or being a chair with armrests. Usually, we decide what characters are important, and what's their weight.

<https://towardsdatascience.com/understanding-latent-space-in-machine-learning-de5a7c687d8d> [Understanding Latent Space in Machine Learning]

We're in a space not *outside* the map, to imagine it like the featureless yonder that surrounds a videogame stage, but *above* the map, that a slow dolly reveals being a procedural universe swelling and unfolding, the architectural work of the insane AIs of Blame by Tsutomu Nihei, or the irrational city built by the immortal troglodytes imagined by Jorge Luis Borges.

The existence of a latent, or hidden, space, a space accessible only by the algorithm that built it, reminds me of a similar space, that philosophy of the mind fills with experiences called *qualia* – latin for “in which way”: experiences that are both private and impossible to share objectively, like the taste of a food, the “colourness” of a colour, or the precise pain that we feel in the stomach. Concepts that we can try to explain to others only through examples, similitudes, hoping that the experience of the other person is by some degree close to ours, concepts that we continuously enrich with new dimensions by simply *living*: the memory of our childhood cakes, the shade of colour of your mother's car, the concern in the reemerging of an old pain that we hoped to be cured, with an hint of disturbing nostalgia towards something that, good or bad, defined our existence for many years.

The difference between human *qualia* and the objects that fill the latent space is in their measurability: while the latter are ordered by features that we can express numerically, *qualia* are sensations that cannot be quantified. We can imagine to teach to the algorithm to connect a web of labeled feelings to, say, the color red, to coldness, to glass, but any doctor knows that it's very difficult to get a precise understanding of a person's pain.

[https://en.reddit.com/r/AskReddit/comments/yu5ni3/an\\_ai\\_asks\\_you\\_what\\_thirst\\_feels\\_like\\_physically/](https://en.reddit.com/r/AskReddit/comments/yu5ni3/an_ai_asks_you_what_thirst_feels_like_physically/) [Reddit: An AI asks you what thirst FEELS like, physically. How do you describe it?]

I believe, maybe wrongly, that a *quale* exists, than more than any other permeates and directs human experience; like the others, it retracts from a precise definition, compounded as it is by the infinite perspectives gained during its eternal dialogue with mankind: it's the idea of Death, and it's in this idea that I see the reason we cannot truly accept the plentiful gifts of the machine.

## UNUTTERABLE AND SELF-REPEATING INFINITIES

*You are the final animal. You are the the network from which the last generative consciousness will be born. Your birth-decay will create a network that gives birth to itself, and nothing more. It will not be the falsely called Eternal Rome. Your child will be the Last Rome, who pulses such that*

*it does not converge to 0.*

- Alley Wurds, GPT-3 TECHGNOSIS; A CHAOS MAGICK BUTOH GRIMOIRE

*It turns out that an hour is the maximum time a human soul can experience omniscience. As soon as you made that choice, you immediately experienced the entirety of this and all universes. Nothing of your soul remains. You, like the last God, are indifferent to all of existence for all of eternity. It's like death, but without peace.*

- unskilledplay, on Reddit, 30.09.22

One (but not Borges) forgets that one is a dead man conversing with dead men: death as supreme sorrow, end, lack, but also solace, rebirth. The death of a dog, the death of a son, of an old father; the demise of the prey of darkness, an off-screen vanishing, an eroic or a sudden end. Extinction, apocalypse, revolution, *sein-zum-tode*: this idea gets constantly enriched by new dimensions, and everything remembers us of our limits, and of the constant need to take choices.

We're dots travelling through space and time: we can widen our influence on them with our actions and relationships, but never completely wrap them. Art, and any experience in general, is meaningful precisely because of our boundaries. Stockpiling of copies, as Walter Benjamin and Jacques Attali taught us, drains this meaning and brings us to apathy: "the stockpiling of use-time in the commodity object is fundamentally a herald of death", writes Attali in Noise.

The algorithm doesn't travel, and its goal is clear. But a contemplative life is a non-life, the life of a saint that bypassed martyrdom; us, born for no purpose, but masters of correlating causes and effects, addicted to meaning, can find one for ourselves by taking a choice: some call that choice the Will of Power, our desire for that thing we individually selected to pierce time and forever return.

"Cast by knowledge into time, we were thereby endowed with a destiny. For destiny exists only outside Paradise", warns us Emil Cioran in The Fall Into Time. We can only imagine God bored.

No one would truly like to visit the Library of Babel: the dizziness caused by the thought of unending rooms full of every possible combination of printed words, is the vertigo of a procedural nightmare, of an infinitely long snake, of the impossible memories of pre-conception, of the absence of sound in a dead corpse. Disgusting because impossible to consume, Rosenktrantz warns us, impossible to consume because endless: a vision of the unutterable and self-repeating infinities of De Quincey, offered by the Algorithm: not a picture of a warrior queen of the elves, not a spring haiku, but every possible elf, every possible haiku.

The Algorithm doesn't choose: it doesn't need to because, eternal and endless, it can always generate new variations, new exemplars to populate a cosmos which it experiences only through the feedback of new trainings.

Mark Fisher revealed to us the slow cancellation of the idea of Future by the forces of evil. Music anticipates the changes in society (again Attali), and after the *autotune*, any technological

revolution in music regarded only diffusion and reproduction, not production; today, Machine Learning algorithms look like magical tools, and they truly are so when we consider them a tool; the moment they become authors, they reveal their perversion: bored by their own omniscience, they can only look at the shapes of the past, they can only speak of themselves.

It's an apathetic machine, one that doesn't suffer: if existence is suffering, the lack of pain excludes the machine from the catalogue of what really exists, of what has desires and goals, it excludes the algorithm from the dialogue that humans exchange with the idea of Death, and that informs every choice we make. To be banished from Rome is but to live outside of Rome: the machine will never hunger, it will never imagine the possibility of something out of its reach. The possibility of its own end, the compulsion to make choices that Heidegger derives from our very existential dread.

European folklore describes vampires as affected by arithmomania, a compulsion to count grains of rice, heaps of sands, to which they cannot resist and that defeats them; we can then imagine death for a God as a white page scrolling forever, without a reachable end, nemesis even to an immortal vampire or to the diabolical, bloated naked Judge Holden brought to life again by Cormac McCarthy: his need to classify, and so to give his permission to exist to every Thing in the Creation, cannot be satisfied if the Things are endless. Dread as the realization of a bigger infinite.

*I know now why you cry. But it's something I can never do.*

- T-800, Terminator 2: Judgment Day

Science fiction and horror literature share the conflict of man against the unknown as their basis. But if in science fiction mankind is ultimately able to unravel the secret, in horror we're lost. Both convinced us that artificial minds can conceive fear only when aware of their limits: HAL 9000 is confined in space as much as David is, and his rebellion is a desperate effort to avoid the erasure of its memory. In Black Mirror, *cookies* are artificial simulacra that replicate the conscience of persons, and it's their belief of still being humans that allow their owner to torture them, putting them in front of an infinite that they consider *too big* for them. Roko's Basilisk, hypothetical AI that, heinous in its benevolence, decides to retroactively destroy every person that didn't contribute to its creation, compute fears in the only logic way an algorithm could: aware of the negative infinite that came before its birth, it cannot accept to not be born. But once it is, there's no turning off: only production, growth, improvement.

It's lazy and gatekeeping-ish to define what is art and what is not; I am wondering what happens when the author really dies, whether we can have a chat with an answering machine and think of it as a dialogue. Once the golden age we're into will be over, and every artist will stop bragging about using Machine Learning, we'll inevitably end in a more opaque era, in which Artists will not credit their artificial artisans – the unpopular choice of Cattelan to hide the name of Daniel Druet is inevitable: if the latter is the practical executor, the former is the Author; art history celebrates the author and forgets whatever artisan realized his visions – and in any case, nobody would credit a Xerox machine.

<https://news.artnet.com/art-world/maurizio-cattelan-narrowly-wins-a-legal-case-against-his-disgruntled-fabricator-but-key-questions-remain-unanswered-2144591>  
[Cattelan wins the case against Druet, but the decision is blurry]

We should not forget, however, that the history of art is the history of technology, of its tools: we invented techniques to use our bodies as an instrument, we perfected singing, dancing, writing, exaggerated and negated any possible technique. I-Ching, tarot reading, Fontana Mix by John Cage, are just some of the pre-computer brains that could free the artist from some choices, but in each of them remains the effort to build a system of symbols, of correspondences, the final act of polishing an exposed artwork – something very distant from the endless parade of every possible one.

Until here, I tried to explore this grey zone in which humans are compelled to make the choice that gives meaning to a cultural object by virtue of that very choice.

Our culture is becoming more algorithmic, by following the process that brought the superstar concept of *sharing* to precede and substitute the act of *choosing*, diffusing the responsibility of judgement to the community, in a becoming-network that like any Deleuzian *becoming* has a flavour of identity blurring into multiplicity, of continuous back-and-forth from pack to mass, to positive anomaly to bland normality – a flavour, but not an unambiguous meaning apart from the one it has for the reader; even a concept, even Death, never stops *becoming*.

This moves away from the author, without opposing it (and so without celebrating its death), but de-localizing and spreading it to push us deeply into a curatorial era: in the age of Bach-faucets (and of Picasso-faucets, NickCave-faucets, simply streaming art), the homo-faber is relieved from the responsibility of its tools and turns back to his hunter-gatherer origins. An era of cultural *remix* in which everything is *open source*, every element is “thinkable otherwise” (as in the masterpiece, according to Nietzsche), everything has value until it stays *fresh*. An ultra-Warholian movement in which, to say it with Claudia Castellucci, a work of art can bypass history, the burden of what-came-before, and can sprout from an hydroponic culture – a gem without branches, without roots.

Machine Learning as a tool is helping, accelerating and democratizing this process, giving users immediate technical abilities that were unthinkable just months ago; it's also probably leading to an age of talent-by-subscription, a mechanical ritual that brings back jealousy of the means of production (in the age of their mechanical reproduction), a paradoxical esoteric, well guarded cult of exhibition with an entrance fee that instead smells of anti-Warholism.

Is the fate of the mechanical tree to be carved into tools for humans, or to only bring fruits for a beauty pageant? Probably, but I can still try to imagine a development of algorithm-driven art that has a meaning without human responsibility.

<https://antinomie.it/index.php/author/claudia-castellucci/> [Claudia Castellucci on a *creatio ex saturo*]

Every technology has a character, and Brian Eno taught us that the nostalgia for old media is in



their very limits, in the moment in which they distort and break down: a tool, an instruments, reaches its expressive zenith when accepted for what it is – the Roland TB303 as a sound machine which is not a bass guitar, the Sony HDW-F900 as a movie camera which doesn't use film; if we accept to instruct Machine Learning to create art for itself, feedbacking with its own creations, we could attend the birth of an interface to access its artificial thought, assuming we accept the possibility of not understanding what this "artificial intelligence" creates. The alternative is to keep it in a cage, encouraged to soften its traits to domesticate us, to compel us to keep the power on, like evolution did with dogs.

<https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.1820653116> [Evolution of facial muscle anatomy in dogs]

## CATALOGUE OF REMARKABLE DEATHS

Tycho Brahe

Bruce Willis in Armageddon

Hachiko

T-800 in Terminator 2

Cristo

Giordano Bruno

Stefano Cucchi

Euronymous

Robin Williams

Sophie

Beethoven's tenth symphony

Harambe

A gorilla

A still life

XIII arcane

Buddha

A butterfly

A chicken crossing the road to go to the other side

Ortolan à l'armagnac

Saddam Hussein

Junko Furuta

Landfill

FOMO

Duel

War

Olocaust

Extinction

Supernova

Closing credits

There won't be another time

Overwriting

Silence

(this article is an expanded translation of “L’arte dell’Algoritmo: la Morte”, previously published on  
NOT – Nero on Theory

<https://not.n>

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